

Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY TUNIS

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SUBJECT: TUNISIAN AMBASSADOR HEDDA RESPONDS TO NEW YORK
TIMES ARTICLES

FYI - FOLLOWING LETTER PUBLISHED IN MARCH 2 NEW YORK TIMES
LETTERS TO EDITOR SECTION:

QUOTE: OF CIVIL RIGHTS AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS IN TUNISIA:
TO THE EDITOR: I WAS DISMAYED TO READ THE ARTICLE "TENSION
IN TUNISIA," BY EQBAL AHMAD AND STUART SCHAAR, WHICH
APPEARED ON THE FEBRUARY 13 OP-ED PAGE. A GREATER SHOCK,
HOWEVER, WAS CAUSED BY YOUR EDITORIAL ON THE SAME DATE,
WHICH SEEMED TO SUPPORT THE OFFENSIVE AND INACCURATE
ARTICLE ABOUT MY COUNTRY.

IN TUNISIA, THE RIGHT TO STRIKE IS GUARANTEED AND PROTECTED
BY LAW. NEVER IN OUR HISTORY HAS A STRIKE BEEN PROHIBITED.
THE STRIKE BY THE GENERAL UNION OF TUNISIAN WORKERS ON
JANUARY 26 ERUPTED INTO A FULL-SCALE RIOT AND WAS CLEARLY
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POLITICALLY INSPIRED. IT WAS PRECEDED BY TWO DAYS OF
RARE VIOLENCE, AND IT DEGENERATED INTO VANDALISM, LOOTING
AND ARSON.

NO SELF-RESPECTING NATION CAN PERMIT ANY GROUP TO MOCK THE
LAW, TO SET PUBLIC BUILDINGS AFIRE, TO RANSACK HOMES AND
STORES AND TO DESTROY PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PROPERTY.

ELEMENTS OF THE ARMED FORCES WERE CALLED IN ONLY WHEN IT BECAME CLEAR THAT THE POLICE COULD NO LONGER CONTROL THE SITUATION. ATTEMPTS TO RESTORE ORDER WERE MET WITH VIOLENT RESISTANCE. CASUALTIES RESULTED ON BOTH SIDES, WHICH WE DEEPLY DEPLORE, BECAUSE VIOLENCE IS INCONSISTENT WITH TUNISIAN TRADITION.

MESSRS. AHMAD AND SCHAAR'S FALSE ASSERTION THAT TUNISIA HAS A WIDENING GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR IGNORES OFFICIAL REPORTS FROM INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, INCLUDING THE WORLD BANK AND THE INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND, AS WELL AS FROM FOREIGN OBSERVERS. IN FACT, AND ACCORDING TO THE I.M.F. SURVEY (JANUARY 1978), NOT ONLY DID TUNISIA'S COST OF LIVING INCREASE MODERATELY AT AN ANNUAL AVERAGE RATE OF 5.9 PERCENT, BUT TUNISIA FURTHER ACHIEVED AN IMPRESSIVE RATE OF ECONOMIC GROWTH DURING THE 1973-76 PLAN. FURTHERMORE, MINIMUM WAGES HAVE DOUBLED IN THE PAST SIX YEARS. THE WORLD BANK FINDS THAT TUNISIA'S REAL GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT HAS GROWN DURING THE 1970'S AT AN AVERAGE ANNUAL RATE OF 9 PERCENT, ABOUT TWICE AS FAST AS IN THE PRIOR DECADE.

WOMEN ENTERING THE WORK FORCE AND THE ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES OF THE E.E.C., TUNISIA'S TRADITIONAL TRADING PARTNER, HAVE COMPOUNDED THE COMPLEXITIES OF OUR UNEMPLOYMENT PROBLEM; YET DURING THE FOURTH PLAN (1973-76), THE GOVERN-

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MENT CREATED 164,000 JOBS, MORE THAN THE 119,000 PROJECTED. DURING THE CURRENT FIVE-YEAR PLAN, IT IS EXPECTED THAT 254,000 NEW JOBS WILL BE CREATED.

THE OP-ED ARTICLE STATES THAT INDEPENDENT TUNISIAN NEWS-PAPERS WERE CLOSED. THAT IS UNTRUE. ACTUALLY, TUNISIA BOASTS MANY NEWSPAPERS, WHICH ARE VOCAL AND NOT ALWAYS IN AGREEMENT WITH THE GOVERNMENT. COMPLETELY INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS APPEAR REGULARLY, WITHOUT CENSORSHIP. THE LABOR UNION ITSELF PUBLISHES A WEEKLY WHOSE ARTICLES ARE OFTEN ANTI-GOVERNMENT, YET THE PAPER HAS NEVER BEEN BANNED.

THE ARTICLE AND THE ACCOMPANYING CARTOON ARE DELIBERATELY INSULTING TO TUNISIA, A COUNTRY WHICH FOR THE LAST 22 YEARS HAS DEVOTED 35 PERCENT OF ITS BUDGET TO EDUCATION, AND ONLY 3 TO 6 PERCENT TO ITS ARMED FORCES, THE LATTER REPUTEDLY THE SMALLEST ALLOCATION IN THE WORLD.

TO REFER TO TUNISIA IN THE CONTEXT OF MILITARIZATION, AS MESSRS. AHMAD AND SCHAAR DO, IS WHOLLY UNWARRANTED. IT GRANTS TOTAL FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT TO ALL, INCLUDING

ISSUANCE OF FIVE-YEAR PASSPORTS VALID FOR EVERY COUNTRY
IN THE WORLD. IT SENDS MORE THAN 1.25 MILLION CHILDREN
TO SCHOOL, OUT OF A POPULATION OF 6 MILLION; IT ACCORDS
ITS WOMEN FULL PARTICIPATION IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS.
TUNISIA WELCOMES MORE THAN A MILLION TOURISTS ANNUALLY,
AND IT ENJOYS AN INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION FOR ITS JOIE
DE VIVRE. IN NO WAY IS OUR COUNTRY MILITARISTIC OR
REPRESSIVE.

DID THE AUTHORS OF THE ARTICLE DELIBERATELY IGNORE
TUNISIA'S KEEN INTEREST IN HUMAN RIGHTS? DID THEY TOTALLY
IGNORE THE WELL-ESTABLISHED TUNISIAN LEAGUE FOR THE RIGHTS
OF MAN? WHY DID THEY OVERLOOK THE FINDINGS OF YOUR STATE
DEPARTMENT'S REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICES?
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WE ARE STRIVING, WITHIN THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM, TO ACHIEVE
SOCIAL PROGRESS, ECONOMIC STABILITY AND A COMMENDABLE
RECORD IN HUMAN RIGHTS. WE DESERVE FAIRER TREATMENT FROM
YOU. ALI HEDDA, AMBASSADOR OF TUNISIA, WASHINGTON,
FEBRUARY 22, 1978. END QUOTE. VANCE

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